



WALT DISNEY BIRTHPLACE

2156 North Tripp Avenue

Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks
January, 1991

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Erected 1892-93

Mickey Mouse was born in a small cottage on the Northwest Side of Chicago, as was Donald Duck, Goofy, and a multitude of imaginary characters whose names and images are familiar around the world. As unlikely as this may seem, these characters all can trace their origins to a frame cottage at 2156 North Tripp Avenue, where their creator, Walt Disney, was born on December 5, 1901.

Walt Disney's international stature as the creator of animated features, films and theme parks has all but obscured his associations with any geographic area outside of Hollywood, yet the origins of his life and career have distinct Chicago associations and imagery. Disney was born in a modest cottage which was hand-built by his father, a carpenter whose professional experience included working on the construction of the World's Columbian Exposition in the early 1890s. Even Disney's first name "Walter" had local origins, having been given to honor Reverend Walter Parr, pastor of the nearby St. Paul Congregational Church where the Disney family were members. Young Walter Elias Disney lived with his parents and three brothers and one sister in the Tripp Avenue cottage until the age of four when the family sold the house and moved to a farm near Marceline, Missouri, in early 1906.

The Disney Family

The story of Walt Disney's association with Chicago began in 1890 when his parents, Elias and Flora Disney, moved to the city as a young married couple seeking new opportunities after a failed attempt at orange growing in Florida. The Disneys arrived with their one-year-old son Herbert and were expecting the birth of their second son, Raymond, who was born in Chicago in December, 1890. In subsequent years, the family grew with the birth sons Roy in 1892, Walter in 1901, and a daughter, Ruth, in 1903.

Elias Disney was born in the Lake Huron region of Canada in 1859, the son of Irish immigrant parents, whose ancestors could be traced to the French invaders of England in 1066, the origins of the family name being in the French surname D'Isigny. At the age of nineteen, Elias Disney emigrated to the United States with his father and two older brothers seeking fortunes in the California gold fields. After a disappointing venture in California, the Disneys settled in Ellis, Kansas, where Elias first met his future wife, Flora Call. Restless for new opportunities, Elias traveled the west as a laborer in building a railroad from Kansas to Denver, during which time the Call family had moved to Florida. Elias and his family followed the Call family to Florida where he eventually proposed marriage. The two were married in Akron, Florida, in January 1888, Elias being twenty-eight years of age, and Flora nineteen. In December of the same year, their first son, Herbert, was born.

In Florida, Elias sought to provide for his wife and child through a series of jobs and ventures, including cattle ranching, management of a hotel, a government position as Postmaster of Kissimmee, Florida, and finally as owner and operator of a citrus grove. A killing frost brought Elias' investment in the citrus grove to an abrupt end, inspiring him to again move on, this time his destination being Chicago.

New Opportunities in Chicago

Upon arriving Chicago in 1890, Elias established himself in the carpentry trade, perhaps hoping to claim a share of the booming construction business taking place in the rapidly growing city. For their home, the Disneys rented a small cottage on the Near South Side at 3515 South Vernon Avenue (now demolished), which had been originally erected when the area was isolated prairie. Ironically, the neighborhood had subsequently become a fashionable residential area, with the Disney's modest home being sandwiched amid costly brick dwellings of well-to-do Chicagoans. Despite the fact that the Disneys had little money and probably paid a small rent for their modest cottage, they nevertheless found themselves to be residents of one of the city's most exclusive neighborhoods.

Elias Disney found an outlet for his carpentry skills in the massive construction project for the buildings and grounds of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Jackson Park in 1892-93. Construction on the fairgrounds began early in 1891, with Elias probably commuting to the site from the nearby 35th Street Station on special work trains run by the Illinois Central Railroad. No specific record has been found to document the exact nature of Elias Disney's work on the fair, but the construction of the principal buildings out of staff-covered wood insured ample work for Chicago's carpentry trade. Some sources suggest that Elias was engaged in the construction of furniture for display at the fair, but no documentary evidence has been found to verify this attribution.

The Disney Family Builds a House

With the work on the fair well underway and two children in the household, Elias Disney began to make plans for the future. On Halloween Day, 1892, Disney paid \$750 for a 25 x 125 corner lot on Tripp Avenue, on the Northwest Side of Chicago. The area been annexed into the city in 1889 and soon became a desirable location for working-class families to buy lots and build homes of their own. When Disney purchased his lot, Tripp Avenue had been improved with city sewers but was otherwise largely undeveloped. This changed rapidly within a decade as the vast



Walt Disney's parents, Elias and Flora Disney. (Courtesy Walt Disney Archive)

tracts of vacant land became densely built up with small cottages and two-flats. Many of these closely resembled the Disney cottage in appearance and scale.

Elias Disney chose not to build immediately on his land, possibly due to its remoteness from his employment at the World's Fair site. Within a year, however, the work on the fair was largely complete, and the family had further expanded with the birth of a third son, Roy, in June of 1892. Free of the necessity to live on the South Side, the Disneys began plans to leave their rented cottage and erect a house of his own on the Tripp Avenue lot. Flora Disney later recalled the modest circumstances of the Disney family at the time the house was constructed:

[Elias made] a dollar a day. Seven dollars a week. That's all he made for the year, averaged for the year was \$7 a week. And there wasn't any such thing known as relief then. Living wasn't as high..... Dad built [our home] in Chicago. He borrowed the money to build it. We had the lot. (Interview at Elias and Flora Disney's fiftieth wedding anniversary in the Walt Disney Archives.)

On November 23, 1892, Elias Disney obtained a building permit to build a two-story, 18 x 28 foot wood cottage, costing approximately \$800. Elias was able to keep the cost low on the cottage by acting as his own contractor, and doing much of construction work himself. It is doubtful that a professional architect was consulted, but family reminiscences suggest that Flora Disney was instrumental in working out the floor plan and securing the construction materials. In a 1967 interview, Roy Disney recalled how his parents made a business of erecting similar houses for their Northwest Side neighbors:

Dad had his contacts where he could get help to get a loan, and he would draw the plans and build the houses. Mother was the architect and between the two, mother drew the plans, and mother bought the materials and dad was the builder and they worked like a team.

The Disney cottage did not differ appreciably from the typical low-cost, wood frame workers cottages which were being built throughout the city at the time. The cottage was a clapboarded, two-story, gable roofed structure, probably planned with a parlor and combined kitchen/dining room on the first floor and bedrooms above. An extant early photograph taken



Walt Disney and his sister Ruth on the front porch of the Tripp Avenue cottage, circa 1905. (Courtesy Walt Disney Archive)

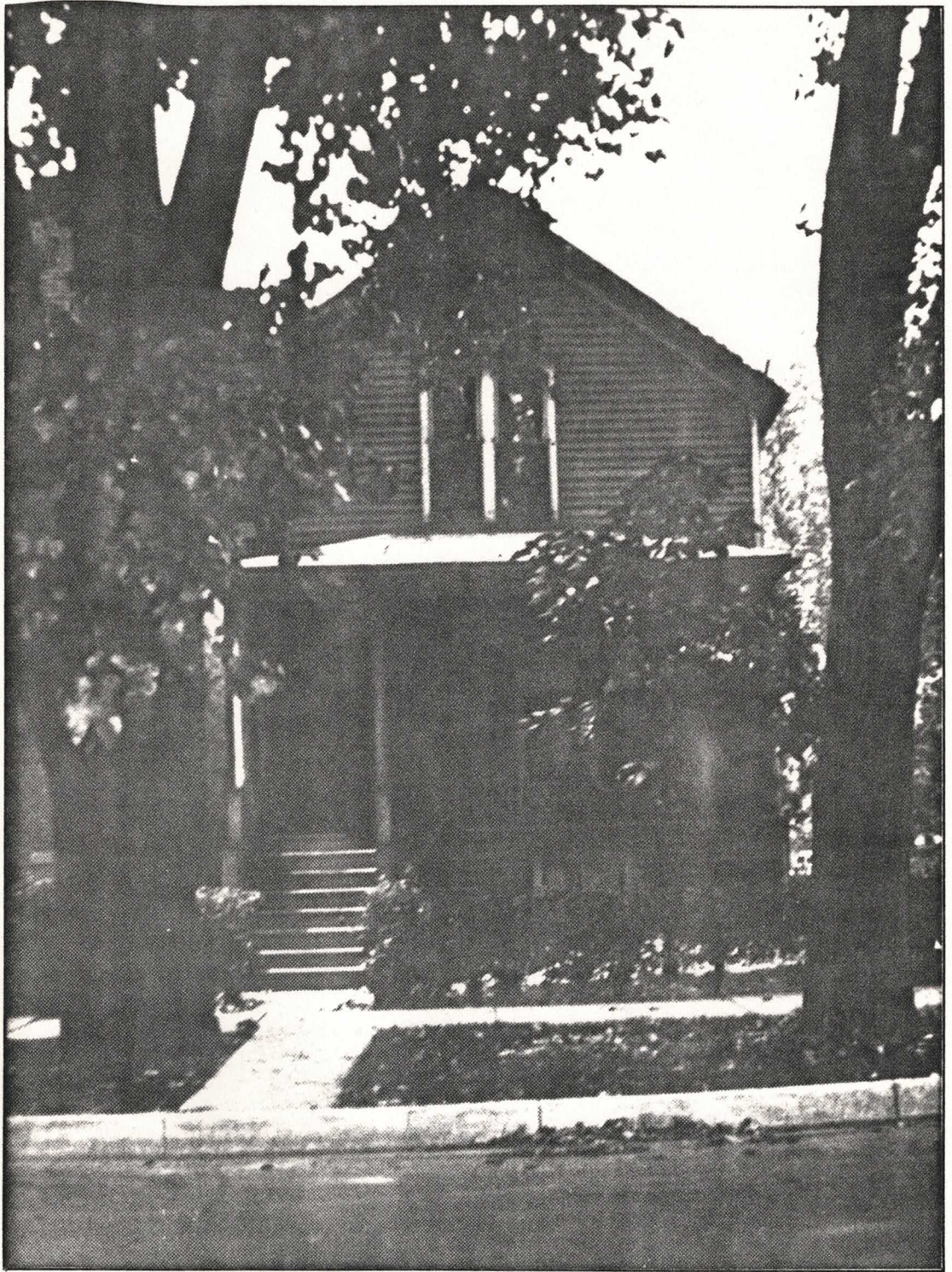
circa 1905 suggests that the house was originally built at grade, without a basement, with the entrance on Tripp Avenue being accessed by a simple open platform porch. Roy Disney later recalled the exterior being painted "white with blue-grey trim" and he also recalled "an apple tree in the rear yard."

The Disney family settled into their new home by early 1893 and in the subsequent years witnessed the surrounding of their once-isolated home with other small cottages and dwellings. Elias and Flora Disney invested in this neighborhood real estate boom by erecting two additional dwellings on Tripp Avenue for income purposes: a cottage at 2118 N. Tripp which was erected in 1899 and sold upon completion, and another at 2114 N. Tripp, erected in 1900 and retained by the Disneys as a rental income property.

One of the pioneering religious organizations to locate in the vicinity of the Disney residence was the St. Paul Congregational Church which held services on Kildare Avenue near Cortland Street. The Disney family became members of the congregation and were active in the efforts to erect a new church building on property acquired by the church at 2255 N. Keeler Avenue. When construction began in 1900 on the new church, Elias Disney took part in the carpentry work. The Disneys became friends with the church's pastor, Reverend Walter Parr, and when it was discovered both that the Parrs and the Disneys were expecting the birth of children in 1901, Reverend Parr suggested that if both were boys, that they should name their children after each other. Both families indeed had boys, born a day apart in December 1901. True to their pact with Reverend Parr, the Disneys named the baby boy born in the Tripp Avenue cottage Walter Elias Disney.

The birth of Walter Disney was followed by the arrival of a sister, Ruth, in 1903, making a total of five children in the Disney household. Unfortunately, the peaceful environment which the Disney's chose for the raising of their family soon began to change. By the turn-of-the-century, the quiet isolated neighborhood that Elias found in 1891 was soon showing signs of some of the negative aspects of being part of a large city, one of the most disturbing aspects being the proliferation of nearby saloons. Elias sought to organize the parishioners of St. Paul's into a protest against the saloons and resulting displays of public intoxication, but he soon realized that he was facing a losing battle. After nearly fifteen years of living on Tripp Avenue, the Disneys decided it was time to move on. After purchasing a farm near Marceline, Missouri, Elias and Flora Disney severed their ties with Chicago by selling the house on Tripp Avenue in February, 1906, to Walter Chamberlain, who is listed in the city directories as a "clerk."

Typical of small cottages, the Disney house has undergone several of alterations and enlargements by subsequent owners over the years. Building permits were taken out in 1924 for alterations, but the city records documenting the exact nature of the remodeling have been destroyed. Site conditions indicate that the 1924 work involved the raising of the house on a new brick foundation to create a full basement, and a modest addition to the rear. Another change, probably dating from the 1924 alterations, was the construction of a covered porch across the front elevation, replacing the platform porch originally built by Elias Disney. From an appearance standpoint, the most extensive alterations occurred circa 1965 when the later porch was removed, the original clapboards covered with synthetic siding, and the windows on the Tripp Avenue elevation altered in configuration and placement. Despite these extensive alterations, examination of early photographs and a thorough examination and analysis of the remaining original fabric of the house could probably form the basis for a responsible restoration or reconstruction of the cottage to its form during the period of its occupancy by the Disney family. In its present altered state, the house and property should be considered as a historic *site*, but one in which the remaining historic fabric of the existing building should be recognized and protected.



This circa 1930 view shows the house with a raised foundation and a porch added after the Disneys sold the property. *(Courtesy Walt Disney Archive)*

The Disney Family Strikes Out for New Territories

The remainder of Walt Disney's childhood and adolescence was divided between the farm in Marceline, Missouri, Kansas City, and again in Chicago. The continuing wanderlust of his parents in seeking new opportunities later prompted brother Roy to recall that "Pa always had ants in his pants. He never could stay in one place long enough to warm a seat."

At the farm in Marceline, Missouri, young Walt Disney was intrigued by the animals and wildlife of his new rural environment, and soon displayed an aptitude for drawing. He often chose animals as his subject matter, perhaps forming the foundations of his later career. Walt stayed in his rural environment from the age of four until he was eight when his family again moved, settling in Kansas City in 1910 where Elias established himself in the newspaper delivery business, assisted by his young sons.

By 1917, the family was again in Chicago where Elias had invested in a soft-drink manufacturing company. For their new Chicago residence, the Disneys chose not to return to their former Northwest Side neighborhood, but instead rented a large frame house at 1523 Ogden Avenue (now demolished), located on the Near West Side near Union Park.

An Animated Career

Walt Disney enrolled for his senior year at McKinley High School where his drawing talents were used to provide humorous cartoons and illustrations for the school newspaper and yearbook. He also sought to hone his talents by taking night classes at the Academy of Fine Arts, a private art school located on Madison Street near Michigan Avenue, and by closely following the work of cartoonists who appeared in the Chicago newspapers and national humor magazines. Many of Disney's early cartoons drawn for the McKinley High School publications involved patriotic subjects promoting support for and participation in World War I. Disney's patriotic fervor led him to lie about the year of his birth to enlist as a Red Cross ambulance driver in 1918, serving in France during the closing months of the war. Even in France, Disney used his art talents to make signs, posters, and drawings for the benefit and amusement of his fellow ambulance drivers.

After leaving France, Disney returned to Kansas City where he undertook a career in commercial art, and later a job with a commercial slide company that was doing work in the rapidly developing industry of filmed cartoon animation. Taking an interest in the technical and

artistic aspects of the medium, Walt began experiments in the improvement of the processes used by the company and set up a small studio in his garage where he began making animated cartoons of his own. Realizing that the greatest opportunities in the film industry were in California, Disney liquidated his modest assets and moved to Hollywood in August, 1923, where he and his brother Roy opened their own animation studio.



Walt Disney parodied "Pigtail Day" at McKinley High School in this cartoon for the school newspaper.

Starting modestly with limited capital, the Disney animation studios soon became one of the country's most remarkable success stories. Many of their early cartoons were well-received shorts featuring animal characters, but Walt Disney and his fledgling studio were suddenly catapulted into international attention with the introduction of a charismatic character known as Mickey Mouse. Initially introduced as a silent feature in 1928, Disney followed the trends towards "talking" movies by giving his third Mickey Mouse cartoon "Steamboat Willie" synchronized sound. The public response was overwhelming, with the image of Mickey Mouse becoming one of the most familiar popular culture images of the time, a reputation which continues undiminished today.

By the 1930s the Disney Studio was one of the largest and most successful in the world. The studio gained a reputation for its technical innovations and the creative advancement of the animated cartoon as a serious art medium. Facing dire predictions of failure from his associates, Walt Disney undertook the production of what was to become one of the pioneering full-length musical animated features, the 1938 release "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", a work which elevated the status of the animated "cartoon" to a status equal to contemporary live-action films. The name Disney soon became synonymous with quality animated features, and with the creation of innumerable imaginary characters who have become staples of international fantasy imagery.

By the 1950s, the Disney studios had branched out into live-action films and a successful venture into the medium of television, with Walt Disney himself acting as the genial host of a long-running program featuring the creative products of his genius. Again acting against the negative pronouncements of his associates, Walt Disney began construction of an unprecedented fantasy recreational park in Anaheim, California, which opened as Disneyland in 1955. Now acknowledged as the progenitor of the medium of "theme parks", Disneyland features rides and attractions based on his own fantasy characters, as well as on historical, scientific, and technological themes. The result was the creation of a self-contained "dream city", which one Disney biographer speculated derived from the stories Elias Disney told his son about Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The themes of Disneyland were carried further in another park developed near Orlando, Florida in the 1960s, which was opened in 1971 as Walt Disney World, a project originally planned by Disney to incorporate a model residential community as an integral part of the development, a feature which has yet to be carried into reality.

With the death of Walt Disney at the age of sixty-five in December 1966, the legacy of his ideas and creations were far from over. His creations have remained vital in the minds of the public, and the studios and theme parks which he founded continue to flourish and still maintain a high reputation for their creative vitality.

In terms of international recognition, Walt Disney is one of Chicago's most famous native citizens, yet his associations with the city remain largely unknown. His importance is of sufficient magnitude that the site of his birth has intrinsic value worthy of preservation. By so doing, Chicago can rightfully reclaim its significant role in Walt Disney's life and career.



World War I patriotic themes were frequently expressed in Disney's high school cartoons.



The Disney cottage as it appears in 1991.

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Walt Disney Archives, Burbank, California

Staff for this publication

Timothy Samuelson

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



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